

SAILING MADE ACCESSIBLE TO DISABLED

Massachusetts program lets people with any disability experience getting out on the water

By Nell Smit

Abigail, a student at the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation, is leaning over the gunwale of a 19-foot Flying Scot and looking straight down into the waters of Massachusetts' Duxbury Bay.

"I thought water was blue," she says.

"What color do you see?" I ask, making certain she is firmly seated with

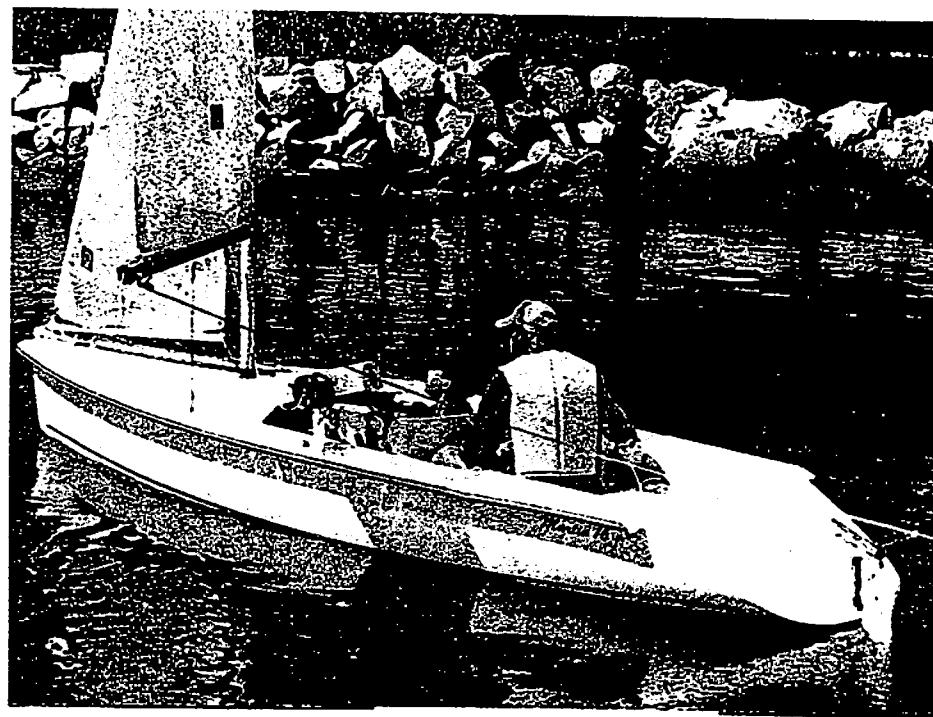
her life jacket on.

"Black!" she says with a bold, but disappointed voice.

"Now, Abigail, look over there toward Clark's Island. What color do you see?" I say, pointing south toward Clark's Island and Gurnet Light.

"Oh, it's blue!" she says, her whole countenance brightening, and she claps her hands.

Abigail is a participant in the Accessail



Accessail, a non-profit program created to provide access to sailing to handicapped people, was launched last year in Duxbury, Mass.

program at the Duxbury Bay Maritime School where I have been a volunteer instructor for a couple of years. Sharing the blue water and the sea breeze on Duxbury Bay that day were another student, an EMT and myself.

Accessail is just what the name implies. The program provides access to sailing to handicapped people of all ages who would never otherwise feel the freedom of wind in their hair while surrounded by an expanse of water — the inspiration that has influenced the lives of so many sailors.

The program was the vision of Duxbury resident Gene Ali and his wife, Madeline, a nurse and therapist.

They were inspired when a friend in Miami took them sailing with the popular Shake a Leg sailing program for the disabled in Miami. Shake a Leg began in 1982 to help share sailing with those suffering from a spinal cord injury and related nervous system disorders. The program is highlighted by the annual Newport Regatta and Miami Mid-Winter Regatta.

"I was inspired by the Shake a Leg program and realized that the Duxbury Bay Maritime School had all the facilities needed to institute a similar program," Gene Ali says.

With the support of Ned Lawson, the school's executive director, and

Participants learn to sail in Martin 16s among other small daysailers.



the DBMS board, Ali contacted the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation, Braintree Rehabilitation Center, Cardinal Cushing School in Hanover, Carson Center in Westfield, and the Greenery in Middleboro. The response was overwhelming. In spring 2002, Accessail was launched.

"Our definition of disability is broad," says Ali. "We accept anyone who has cognitive, learning or physical disabilities."

"I had a handicapped kid show an immediate feeling for the wind and the tiller although he had never been sailing before. His assistant on the boat had no feel for the tiller at all," recalls Lawson.

Volunteers says it's small moments like these that are especially rewarding for everyone aboard one of the Accessail boats.

Though not yet a year old, Accessail has already been embraced by this community south of Boston. A local resident donated \$25,000 for the purchase of two Martin 16 sailboats. These 16-foot sloops were customized so a handicapped sailor could be lifted out of a wheelchair and lowered into an adjustable seat facing forward. Mounted in front of the seat is a joystick (the tiller), and the sheets and halyards are within easy reach. An instructor can be seated behind if the sailor needs instruction or assistance. The Martins 16s can be adapted for the quadriplegics to be sailed with the touch of a toggle switch.

A key to the success of the Accessail program is the program director, Veronica Ploude. An avid sailor, Ploude became dedicated to introducing the handicapped to sailing while volunteering in the Shake a Leg program in Miami. She now has a full-time job at DBMS, scheduling both adult-sailing classes and programs for the handicapped.

"I get my greatest satisfaction from introducing people to the pleasures of sailing," says Ploude.

In addition to the two Martin 16s, the Accessail program at DBMS has the use of several Flying Scots, two Marshall 15s and an O'Day.23 — all donated by local residents. Most of the more than 100 participants in the program come from the South Shore (between Boston and Cape Cod). Program organizers say they are looking forward to introducing even more people to the joy of sailing this season.

For information on ACCESSAIL, contact Ploude at (781) 934-7555 or *veronicap@duxbayms.com*. Access the program through the Duxbury Bay Maritime School Web site at *www.duxbayms.com*. ■



**Volunteer
instructors say
seeing the joy of
sailing discovered by
participants is a
great reward.**

